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The language of intersectionality: researching 'lesbian' identity in urban Russia¹

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Introduction

The relationship between identity, lived experience, sexual practices and the language through which these are conveyed has been widely debated in sexuality literature. For example, 'coming out' has famously been conceptualised as a 'speech act' (Sedgwick 1990) and as a collective narrative (Plummer 1995), while a growing concern for individuals' diverse identifications in relations to their sexual and gender practices has produced interesting research focusing on linguistic practices among LGBT-identified individuals (Leap 1995; Kulick 2000; Cameron and Kulick 2006; Farqhar 2000). While an explicit focus on language remains marginal to literature on sexualities (Kulick 2000), issue of language use and translation are seldom explicitly addressed in the growing literature on intersectionality. Yet intersectional perspectives 'reject the separability of analytical and identity categories' (McCall 2005:1771), and therefore have an implicit stake in the 'vernacular' language of the researched, in the 'scientific' language of the researcher and in the relationship of continuity between the two.

Drawing on literature within gay and lesbian/queer studies and cross-cultural studies, this chapter revisits debates on sexuality, language and intersectionality. I argue for the importance of giving careful consideration to the language we choose to use as researchers to collectively define the people whose experiences we try to capture. I also propose that language itself can be investigated as a productive way to foreground how individual and collective identifications are discursively constructed, and to unpack the diversity of lived experience. I address intersectional complexity as a methodological issue, where methodology is understood not only as the methods and practicalities of doing research, but more broadly as 'a coherent set of ideas about the philosophy,

methods and data that underlie the research process and the production of knowledge' (McCall 2005:1774).

My points are illustrated with examples drawn from my ethnographic study on 'lesbian' identity in urban Russia, interspersed with insights from existing literature. In particular, I aim to show that an explicit focus on language can be a productive way to explore the intersections between the global, the national and the local in cross-cultural research on sexuality, while also addressing issues of positionality and accountability to the communities researched. The first section of the chapter contextualises my concern with language within broader debates on sexuality, identity and intersectionality, and is followed by a reflexive account of my journey as a researcher. I explain my motivations and my methodological choices, while contextualising temporally and spatially the development of my research agenda. I detail the strategies used to capture and make sense of 'everyday' language usage, while also reflecting on the intended and unintended implications of the labelling exercise involved in academic research. Finally, I discuss some of the findings of my research project, to illustrate how linguistic analysis can be productively used to forward a research agenda sensitive to cultural difference and able to foreground intersectional complexity.

A note on language and intersectionality

I wish to start with a clarification about the terminology I use in this chapter, and about what is meant here by the 'language of intersectionality'. In discussing my research project, I talk about 'lesbian' identity (in inverted commas) because the women involved in my research project used a variety of terms to define themselves and others, ranging from colloquialisms such as *tema* [literally 'the theme'] and *takaia* [literally 'like that'], to lesbian [*lesbiianka*], bisexual [*biseksual'ka*] and ex-heterosexual [*byvshaia geteroseksual'ka*]. They did not necessarily all self-identify as lesbians, although many did, when explicitly asked about their preferred term of identification during interviews; for this reason, my interviewees are perhaps best collectively referred to as non-heterosexual. In the title and elsewhere, I use the gender-specific 'lesbian' (in inverted commas, and as opposed to the gender-neutral queer) as a shorthand to refer to the broad spectrum of non-heteronormative identifications and practices represented in my study. I occasionally use more specifically the labels lesbian, straight and bisexual

(without inverted commas), a strategy which is intended to reflect women's own terminology and usage. Whenever colloquialisms such as *tema* recur in interviews excerpts, I stuck to the Russian term, in order to preserve the flavour of the original text. In order to avoid cumbersome and awkward language, these gender-neutral colloquialisms have occasionally been translated with the gender-neutral 'queer', in inverted commas.

In the context of the present chapter, the use of inverted commas has two distinct purposes. First of all, it is a strategy of representation: it is used to signify the discrepancy between the Russian original and the English translation, as well as between women's 'everyday' language usage and the way in which this language has been fixed in my academic writing. Secondly, it signals sexual identity categories as objects to explore and unpack rather than as a taken-for-granted, known, stable entities. A concern with the language of identity is central to my research project, and it reflects a growing interest with identity and intersectionality in gay and lesbian/queer studies. Just as intersectionality debates within feminist studies have problematised the universality of the category 'woman' (Brah and Phoenix 2004), a key debate within gay and lesbian/queer studies has centred around the need to destabilise normative gay and lesbian subjects. As this volume shows, a wide variety of approaches and theoretical perspectives have been employed to this end: for example, it has been pointed out that, in LGBT communities, a pretence of 'sameness' often conveniently erases from the picture other inequalities based on gender, class and ethnicity (see for example Taylor 2007; Malanansan 2002). The influential contribution of queer theory and of cross-cultural studies to the 'sexuality and intersectionality' debate, however, is particularly topical for the purpose of this chapter, given their explicit engagement with the cultural politics of language and representation, and for this reason it will be discussed in some detail.

Impatient of the limitations of identity politics and of 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2002; Puar 2007), queer theory has offered an insightful critique of fixed notions of identity based on binary notions of sexual orientation (heterosexual/homosexual, straight/gay). This critique has foregrounded the exclusionary potential of traditional gay and lesbian identity politics, which have tended to marginalise individuals whose experience, practices and identifications do not clearly fit into these categories, notably bisexuals,

transgenders, transsexuals and intersex (Weeks et al., 2003; Seidman 1996). The reappropriation of the derogatory term 'queer' as a subversive term of self-identification partly reflects a commitment to develop more pluralistic politics and research agendas. Indeed, 'queer' was adopted as a loosely defined category, potentially more inclusive of all non-heteronormative sexualities and comprising all the range of the LGBTIQ spectrum (Kulick 2000). Queer theory's critique of binary notions of sexuality and gender ('the heterosexual matrix', Butler 1990) ties in, at some level, with debates within broadly defined cross-cultural (anthropological, transnational, and postcolonial) studies. A vast body of literature has shown that seemingly 'objective' labels, such as 'heterosexual/homosexual' or 'gay/lesbian' are culturally specific, and deeply rooted in Western notions of sexuality, itself a relatively recent invention (Foucault 1978; Vicinus 1992). Research on non-Western sexualities has shown how, while sexual practices may be fairly constant the world over, they are understood and conceptualised differently in different socio-cultural contexts (Weston 1993; Lewin and Leap 2002; Boellstorff 2005). Importantly, the emergence of a *scientia sexualis*, the birth of the 'modern homosexual' (Foucault 1978) and a stricter codification of sexuality and gender into polar opposites in Western Europe coincided with the epoch of imperialism and colonialism (Bleys 1996). The enormous influence that Western discourses on sex and sexuality have had, and continue to have, in other parts of the globe reflects this heritage, and the global power hierarchy it created. Encounters brought about by colonialism, post-colonial migration and globalisation have variously resulted in the clash, homogenisation and hybridisation of sexual identities and cultures (Binnie 2004). These encounters have often been explored through the prism of language, for example by analysing 'local' queer argots and the influence of global sexual culture on them, exemplified by the introduction of English borrowings such as 'gay' and 'coming out' (Leap 1995; Altman 1996; Manalansan 2002; Boellstorff 2005). The unequal power relations involved in the cultural exchange between 'the West' and 'the rest', however, are reflected in the fact that non-Western sexualities are still likely to be measured by Western paradigms: for example, the development of Western-style sexual identity politics, and achievements in the fields of gay rights and sexual citizenship, are often uncritically taken to be a measure a nation's development and successful modernisation (for a critique see Manalansan 2002; Binnie 2004; Puar 2007).

It is in their common antiessentialist stance towards categories of identity, and in their commitment to challenging normative gay and lesbian subjects, that queer and cross-cultural perspectives often converge: as Weston (1993:360) notes, the deconstruction of essentialist (and ethnocentric) notions of homosexuality is central to both anthropological work on sexuality and to queer studies. My research draws on and engages with the debates outlined above, as my project was designed to highlight the plurality of experiences and identifications of women involved in same-sex relations in Russia, and destabilise the notion of a 'universal' lesbian subject. In order to understand how well identity categories such as 'lesbian' translate into the Russian context, I recorded and analysed the terms of identifications that my research participants used. Language and identity were seen not 'merely' a matter of rigorous definition, accurate translation and appropriate terminology; sexual identifications themselves became an object of enquiry, and language became one of the ways through which intersectional complexity was be grasped.

While drawing on the deconstructivist stances outlined above, I engage critically with them, particularly with methodological perspectives coming from queer studies. These perspectives fit into what McCall (2005) calls anticategorical approaches to intersectionality, since their primary concern is to deconstruct identity categories and to expose their arbitrary and normative character. My own approach broadly fits in with traditional intracategorical methodological approaches to intersectionality, wary of the homogenising potential of analytical categories, but also sceptical of the potentially sterile outcomes of deconstructivism. As McCall puts it,

The point is not to deny the importance – both material and discursive – of categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life. (McCall 2005:1783)

Retracing my steps: standpoint and starting points

In the tradition of feminist methodology (Ramanazoglu and Holland 2002; Naples 2003), I wish to explicitly situate myself within my study in order to reflect on research as a process of knowledge production. I address existing debates on intersectionality and sexuality from the viewpoint of someone involved in cross-cultural ethnographic

research, and the points I raise in the chapter inevitably reflect my research interests, the institutional context in which I am situated (an area studies department in a British university), and my own background (an Italian living in Scotland, doing research in and on Russia). My motivations for focusing on 'lesbian' identity in Russia are in some respects very personal. During the course of my studies, I developed a keen interest in Russian language, history and society; however, as a lesbian woman, I was struck by the scarcity of secondary sources on Russian homosexualities and by the fact that, even in the extensive literature on Russian women, lesbianism generally figured only as a passing reference. A research project on 'lesbian' identity in Russia certainly addressed a gap in the literature, and for these reasons my research proposal was deemed viable and fundable. Beyond strategic considerations, my choice of research topic reflected, most of all, a personal and political engagement with the topic: I was determined to find out more out of personal interest and intellectual curiosity, and I thought my project would contribute to putting women involved in same-sex relations on the research agenda. As a novice researcher, perhaps a bit naively, I also hoped that research on LGBT issues, including my own, would somehow contribute to advance the plight of the LGBT community in Russia.

The realisation that, at that point, most academic work on Russian homosexualities had been written by foreign researchers based in America or Western Europe, and had been published outside of Russia, usually in English (Baer 2002), brought home the contradictions involved in cross-cultural research, and the power inequalities entrenched in the world of global academia. While in Russia expertise and academic ability are plentiful, financial support for academic research has been dramatically curtailed since the economic restructuring of the 1990s. Sources of support are particularly scarce for those doing research on controversial topics such as sexuality: until the early 1990s, sexuality was considered a legitimate research topic only in medical research, and homosexuality in particular was considered an off-limits topic of enquiry (Kon 1998; Golod and Kuznetsova 2002). The latter reflected institutionalised homophobia and state sanctioned stigmatisation of non-heteronormative sexualities: male same-sex relations were a criminal offence in Russia until 1993, while lesbianism was labelled a medical condition (Healey 2001). Only recently has research on homosexuality begun to be undertaken in Russia within social sciences disciplines (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002; Nartova 2007).

Differences in terms of available resources, institutional support and broader social context seemed to be reflected in different research agendas. Concerned with putting gays and lesbians on the research agenda, some Russian researchers dismissed Western colleagues' preoccupation with the intricacies of identity and subjectivity as irrelevant to the Russian context (Nartova 2004a). With rare exceptions (Zelenina 2006), existing Russian work on homosexuality does not problematize normative gay and lesbian subjects: for example, it consistently uses the categories 'gay' and 'lesbian', while avoiding 'queer' terminology, and it does not explicitly address the intersections between sexuality and other categories of identity such as race, gender and class. Work by Western researchers was more likely to be informed by debates around identity, subjectivity and intersectionality; for example, Essig's monograph *Queer in Russia* is very much grounded in the notion that 'there is no fixed sexual self' (Essig 1999:xiii), and on Judith Butler's theory of gender and sexual identities as performative, and as 'tenuously constructed in time [...] instituted through a stylised repetition of acts' (Butler 1988: 519).

In reviewing the literature and in trying to bring my own lines of enquiry into focus, I drew on work by both Russian and Western researchers, particularly sociological and anthropological studies based on empirical qualitative research (Nartova 2004a, 2004b; Omel'chenko 2002a, 2002b; Zelenina 2006; Essig 1999; Sarajeva 2010). The present study is positioned within this still narrow but growing body of research, some of which was published while I was doing fieldwork. However, with hindsight, the work of Laurie Essig (1999), an American sociologist, was particularly significant as both a starting point and as a point of departure and contestation. Practical reasons, such as ease and timing of access, come into this, as Essig's work was, at the time when I started working on the project, one of the very few available monographs on homosexuality in post-Soviet Russia. My own position as a Western researcher involved in cross-cultural research meant that I could relate to Essig's theoretical and methodological concerns: like her, I was deeply influenced by the intersectionality debates, and, as a foreigner, I was an outsider to the communities and the society I intended to study.

Essig conducted her fieldwork in the early 1990s, mainly in Moscow. Her book draws on theoretical frameworks from postmodernism, queer theory and cultural studies, and

focuses on the emergence of a community in search of a shared identity in the aftermath of the fall of communism. She draws on different sets of data (participant observation of the activity of local gay and lesbian groups, interviews with activists and with rank-and-file 'queers', readings of 'queer-themed' popular culture), to explore the relationship between subjectivity, identity politics, and regulatory mechanisms of repression and social control of non-heteronormative sexualities. I was particularly intrigued by Essig's central argument, according to which Russian 'queers' do not identify according to their sexual practices, and reject fixed binary notions of sexuality and gender. Essig substantiates her argument by referring to the high incidence of bisexual and transgender practices in the community she studied. She also notes the wide use among Russian 'queers' of euphemistic and ambiguous terms such as *goluboi* ['queer' man, literally 'light blue'], *rozovaia* ['queer' woman, literally 'pink'], collectively referred to as *tema* ['the theme'] or *nashi* ['our people'] (1999:x-ix; 197, n. 28). Essig remarks on the fuzziness and inclusiveness of these terms, and renders them in translation as queer (without inverted commas), since queer, 'like [*the Russian expression*] "our people" [*nashi*] does not rely on a fixed and bifurcated sexuality as straight or gay, but includes a variety of sexual others' (Essig 1999:x). Essig's central argument is reiterated in the final remarks of her book:

This [*Queer in Russia*] is a record, perhaps a fantasy, of a world of multiple desires and flexible identities that was not yet colonised by Western notions of sex and its meanings. I will leave it to future scholars to decide whether that world has disappeared forever. I look forward to their stories about queerness in Russia (Essig 1999:174).

Essig is referring to the lack of a tradition of Western-style identity politics in Soviet Russia, also noted by others (Healey 2001; Engelstein 1993). Neither Western-style gay consumer culture, a by-product of market capitalism, nor identity politics, deeply rooted in the liberal discourse of individual rights and freedoms, contributed to the emergence of a 'reverse discourse' and to the crystallisation of 'gay' and 'lesbian' into narratives of social identity (Engelstein 1993; Foucault 1978). Essig is particularly emphatic on this point, and argues that the emergence of a gay and lesbian movement in post-Soviet Russia is largely the product of the 'colonising' influence of Western activism and sexual culture.

The question left open by Essig – the alleged discrepancy between Russian notions of sexuality and Western ones, and how the relationship between the two would develop in future - was one I could not ignore, given the fact that I was, in many ways, treading in her footsteps. I addressed this question by trying to devise a methodology sensitive to linguistic and cultural diversity. My methodological choices, and the emphasis placed on language, are likely to reflect the way I am positioned, geographically and subjectively, in between different languages and cultures. Through my own experiences of inhabiting different countries, I was often acutely aware of how awkwardly familiar experiences and concepts translate into a different culture and language, and conscious of the difficulties involved in working across two languages different from my native one.

Lost in translation: modernity and the queer *other*

In exploring gay and lesbian language, Kulick argues that 'it is necessary to tread gingerly when [...] considering what name to use to collectively designate the kinds of non-heteronormative sexual practices and identities that are the topic of discussion here' (2000:244). The discrepancy between the analytical categories used by the researchers, and the 'everyday' identity categories used by research participants is an extremely thorny question, because it underscores the unequal power relations between them (Cameron and Kulick 2006; Ka Tat Tsang and Sik Ying Ho 2007). It is important to consider the potential consequences of the labelling exercise inevitably involved in research, and its broader implications in terms of representation, as labelling always carries the hidden danger of stereotyping and 'othering' the social groups and communities under investigation. However, labelling is arguably a particularly sensitive issue for those involved in cross-cultural research, where this exercise involves managing linguistic and cultural differences, and being mindful of global power hierarchies and inequalities. Bleys (1996) shows that European representations of non-Western sexualities constructed the boundaries of a specific 'geography of perversion and desire', which opposed modern, civilised, domesticated 'Western' sexualities to pre-modern, perverse, exotic sexual 'others'. This kind of Orientalist discourse (Said 1978), pitting the 'progressive' and 'liberated' West against the 'traditional' and 'sexually repressed' East, is by no means confined to the past, as the paradigmatic 'modern homosexual' has been replaced with the 'global gay' (Altman 1996), embodied in new

globalising discourses around 'pink dollar' consumerism and LGBT human rights (Binnie 2004; Puar 2007).

The intersection between paradigmatic discourses on sexuality and ethnocentric notions of modernity is particularly relevant here, since Russia has for centuries been imagined as the West's constitutive 'other'. Traditionally, it has been located either on the margins or outside of (modern) Europe, and characterised as 'underdeveloped' and 'backwards' (Neumann 1999; Wolff 1994). While its geographic position across the European and Asian continents contributed to this, the notion of Russia as the West's 'other' was consolidated by the Cold War, and continued after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Neumann 1999). Indeed, the fall of communism in the former Soviet bloc was widely read as evidence of the triumph of Western models of development (Fukuyama 1992), and the deep socio-economic and political transformations occurring in the region in the 1990s were typically framed in terms of an obligatory 'transition' to Western-style democracy and market capitalism. Thus, Russia's communist past was more or less explicitly dismissed as a case of 'arrested development' and 'failed' modernity in much Western academic literature (for a critique see Hann 2002).

The ways in which ethnocentric notions of sexuality and modernity intertwine in Western representations of post-Soviet Russia is nicely summed up by Baer (2002), who notes that Western academic literature and travel writing on Russian 'queers' seemed to be structured along a rather rigid 'East/West' divide:

When Russia was situated on the periphery of Western Europe, with its modern, egalitarian sexuality (the global gay), the Russian gay community would appear as either in transition or underdeveloped. But when Russia was situated in the East, where sexuality was imagined as premodern and had not yet been institutionalised into gay or straight, (homo)sexual desire there appeared to be radically different, polymorphous, a potential erotic alternative to the Western model of desire (Baer 2002:502).

Orientalist undertones are certainly present in accounts such as Schluter's (2002:150), which compares Russian gay and lesbian community life to that of American in the 1940s and 1950s, implicitly holding up Western 'liberated' sexualities and identities as

the model Russians should follow in their path to emancipation. However, narratives that are *not* premised on the assumption that Russians should become, or are becoming, 'like us', such as Essig's (1999), also betray Orientalist assumptions.

Representation is not exclusively a matter of terminology, but it is bound up with the labelling exercise involved in research. Essig's terminology, inspired by queer theoretical and political perspectives, is a good illustration of this. Her use of queer as a collective label for Russian individuals involved in same-sex practices is motivated by her commitment to use open-ended, inclusive terminology which, like the Russian colloquialisms discussed earlier, 'does not rely on a fixed and bifurcated sexuality as straight or gay' (Essig 1999:x). Queer is, by Essig's own admission (1999: x-xi), an unsatisfactory term: to some extent, this is inevitable, since translations can only strive for equivalence between languages, and are unable to convey fully the emotional and semantic connotations of the original language (Müller 2007). However, I argue that queer is a very problematic rendition, given the highly charged political connotations associated with the term. None of the Russian colloquialisms that Essig is trying to capture with 'queer' are derogatory labels which have later been reclaimed as terms of self-identification, and their currency in the Russian context is completely unrelated to the emergence of queer politics and queer theory. The adjective *takaia* (literally 'like that') and *temnaia* ('thematic'), and the collective nouns *tema* ('the theme') and *nashi* ('our people') are neutral, euphemistic terms, which, in my view, would be best translated in English with similarly unmarked expressions such as 'a member of the family', or 'a friend of Dorothy'. Essig's choice of queer is deliberately used to mark Russia as exceptional vis-à-vis Western normative discourses of sexuality, and she seems to project the liberating and subversive promise of queer politics onto the Russian 'other', turing it into a 'sexually liberating alternative to the West' (Baer 2002:514). While failing to acknowledge the very diverse sexual landscapes and theoretical perspectives on sexualities which have emerged within Western societies, Essig's narrative ultimately perpetuates the notion of Russia as the West's 'other'.

In spite of their undoubted contribution to debates on intersectionality, I argue that the potential to subvert and radically challenge ethnocentric notions of sexuality is not inherent to queer perspectives. Merely replacing 'gay and lesbian' with 'queer' terminology does not offer a satisfactory solution to the complex and sensitive issues raised by the labelling process inevitably involved in research (Farqhar 2000; Garber

2003). Unquestioningly embracing 'queer' as 'an intellectual panacea' (Garber 2003) may paradoxically reify both 'local' and 'Western' homosexualities in the process, instead of fulfilling queer theory's initial promise for complexity and fluidity (Garber 2003; Binnie 2004). It should also be kept in mind that queer political activism and academic discourse remain predominantly located within Anglo-American and Western European societies, and are therefore deeply implicated in global power hierarchies. As Puar (2007) notes, the paradigm of gay liberation has been extensively critiqued in sexuality studies, revealing its inadequacies and contradictions. However, little attention has been given to the ways queerness, having itself acquired a paradigmatic status in academic and political discourses, may 'collapse into liberationist paradigms', and claim to speak on behalf of a distant 'other' which is in reality silenced and homogenised by the label 'queer' (Puar 2007:22; Garber 2003).

In order to overcome the impasse outlined above, I argue, with Boelstorff (2007), that we need an approach that avoids the objectification of the sexual 'other', while demanding 'that theorisations be accountable to their subjects of study':

To those in the academy who wish to speak about the actual lives of persons embodied in specific historical, cultural and material contexts, this critical empiricism asks after the relations of adequation between any theorisation and the discursive realities it claims to interpret (Boellstorff 2007:19).

Accountability is a challenge on many levels, as it involves thinking through the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of research, its ability to adequately represent intersectional complexity, and its broader ethical implications. I argue that an open acknowledgement of issues around positionality, hierarchy and inequalities can go some way towards bridging the discrepancy between the 'vernacular' language of the researched and the authoritative academic language of the researcher. The following section discusses the methodology devised for my ethnographic study on 'lesbian' identity in Russia, and suggests possible ways to further a research agenda sensitive to linguistic and cultural diversity. I do not mean to present my methodology as exemplary or innovative: I acknowledge its inevitable limitations, and I don't lay any particular claims to originality either, as I drew heavily on the traditions of ethnography and feminist methodology. The ethnographic approach I used is offered here as an example of a

holistic methodology, with the potential to address in a coherent fashion intersectional complexity, positionality and accountability.

Researching Russian 'lesbians': means and methods

Research was conducted in two Russian cities, Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, over two intense periods of fieldwork (May-July 2004 and April-October 2005). The decision to conduct a comparative study reflected my aim to present a nuanced and spatially layered picture of 'lesbian' life in Russia. Moscow and U'ianvosk were chosen because they represent strikingly different settings, in terms of size, living standards and the presence or absence of a gay scene. The capital Moscow has a population of over ten million, and it is the most affluent and cosmopolitan among Russian cities; its high living standards reflect its ability to successfully restructure its economy after the demise of communism, and its integration into the global economy (Brade and Rudolph 2004). The rise of Muscovites' average spending power has boosted the growth of a vibrant leisure industry (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2004), including a relatively established gay scene, while the capital also hosts various national and international NGOs, including the most established Russian LGBT organisations (Nemtsev 2007). Ul'ianovsk, a provincial centre with a population of 700,000 in the Middle Volga Region, is a very different setting. An important manufacturing centre during the Soviet period, the city has struggled to recover from the shake-ups of economic transition. The lack of a commercial gay scene and of community organisations reflect Ul'ianovsk's peripheral position on the national and international map, its relatively small size, and its low living standards, which compare negatively with those of other cities in the Volga region, such as Saratov and Kazan' (Konitzer-Smirnov 2003).

The main form of data collection used were semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 61 non-heterosexual women, aged 18 to 56, 34 from Moscow and 27 from Ul'ianovsk. Interviews were conducted in Russian and tape-recorded with the informed consent of the research participants. Other data was collected in parallel with the semi-structured interviews. I recorded detailed fieldwork notes of the community events and social gatherings I attended, and carried out expert interviews with Moscow-based community activists and individuals working on commercial projects targeting a 'lesbian' audience; I also collected media sources from the Russian mainstream and gay and lesbian media.

During my first visit to Moscow, access was initially facilitated by two local organisations, the LGBT association *la+la* and the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive; being introduced to the regular gatherings they organised gave me the opportunity to meet and socialise with service users. During my second trip to Russia, I was able to build on the contacts and relations established previously. To recruit potential interviewees, I relied on snowballing, initially via my first contacts, and, as my social circle widened, through new friends and acquaintances. In Ul'ianovsk, a city lacking any obvious point of access to 'queer' women, contacts established with women met in Moscow, but originally from Ul'ianovsk, were crucial in securing access to a local informal 'lesbian/queer' network.

In both cities, I explored very specific social networks: the Moscow network revolved around community initiatives, which were relatively easy to access and attracted mostly women in their late 20s and early 30s. Women from Ul'ianovsk tended to be younger (early-to-mid 20s), and socialised in a mixed-sex 'queer' network, which, in the absence of a gay scene, gathered informally in the city centre.

The in-depth exploration of specific social networks is typical of ethnographic research, which emphasises the context-bound and situated character of knowledge production, since ethnographic data is

(...) created in and through the interaction that occur between the researcher and people in the field, and analysis must therefore illustrate the situated or context-bound nature of the multivocal meanings disclosed in the research. Reflexivity is thus a critical part of the analysis [...] the ethnographer constructs the sense-assembly procedures through which the data were created, locating them, and therefore the analysis, in the process that brought them about (Brewer 2000:181)

Ethnography appealed to me precisely because of its emphasis on interaction, the need to understand people's beliefs and behaviours within their own framework of cultural reference, and the process of letting the research focus emerge organically from empirical data, thereby giving a voice to the community studied. Sustained interaction and reflexivity, however, did not resolve issues around positionality and accountability. These issues are widely struggled with, and researchers can find only partial and contingent solutions to these dilemmas (Naples 2003; Brewer 2000; Lewin and Leap 2002). Carrying out ethnographic research involved the constant renegotiation of my

position, status and role within the communities studied, and in this respect fieldwork was both an extremely challenging and an enormously rewarding experience. The comparative advantages of entering the field as an insider (a 'native' researching one's society and/or social group) or as an outsider (a 'non-native') are widely discussed in ethnographic literature (Naples 2003). My credentials and motivations for conducting research in Russia were often scrutinised by local academics, activists and research participants: sometimes they were the object of curiosity and fascination, sometimes they were openly challenged. However, as Naples (2003) argues, the fluidity of fieldwork identities calls into question firm distinctions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', as 'outsider' researchers can negotiate and be granted (conditional) insider status, based on sustained interaction and experiences shared with the communities and individuals involved in the research. My position in the field continually shifted between that of 'outsider' and conditional 'insider'; it did not hinder my research, although it most certainly informed women's attitudes towards me and their responses to my queries, as well as the questions I asked and my perspective on the data. In many respects I remained an outsider: although I was fluent in Russian, language and cultural differences were obvious barriers; I was also relatively untouched by the economic and social realities of Russia, and as such was sometimes perceived as affluent and privileged, particularly in Ul'ianovsk, where living standards were lower. However, in both cities I developed friendly relations with a few women, based on a genuine connection, common interests and similar life experiences, and was accepted as a friend or guest into their friendship networks ('queer' and otherwise). I often found myself slipping between different roles of researcher, participant observer, and friend, and this inevitably created ambiguities, discomforts and contradictions (Naples 2003). I addressed the dilemmas arising from fieldwork interactions by trying to build some degree of accountability into the relationships developed, for example by helping out in community initiatives to reciprocate the generous support received by local activists, and by feeding my research findings back to the communities studied through the pages of a Moscow non-for-profit lesbian magazine (Stella 2008c).

The ways in which sexuality is discursively constructed through linguistic practice, and in particular through the use of 'everyday' categories of identification (Cameron and Kulick 2006), remained an important focus of my research project. However, my study was not solely focused on women's identifications; right from the beginning, it seemed important

to consider both the *experiences* of women involved in non-heteronormative practices and the *language* through which they conveyed these experiences. As Kulick notes, there is a tendency in gay and lesbian studies to assume that non-heterosexual communities and subjectivities are 'grounded in and exclusive to intentional, self-proclaimed gay and lesbian identities' (Kulick 2000:271). The project was designed to avoid this assumption, and to foreground sexual and cultural practices over self-proclaimed identities. The women involved in this project shared the common experience of present or past involvement in same-sex relations, as well as varying degrees of investment in 'lesbian/queer' spaces, networks and subcultures. Identifications and dis-identifications were seen as relational, and as resulting from the interpretation of personal experience through the prism of available social narratives.

I was interested in how women negotiated their sexual self across different 'everyday' settings, and in how they managed to collectively appropriate certain spaces, sometimes very public ones, as 'lesbian/queer'. The most important line of enquiry of my research explored women's navigations of their 'everyday' settings, including their experiences of the parental home, the workplace and the street, and the use of locations appropriated as 'lesbian/queer' (see Stella 2008a, 2008b, 2010). However, the linguistic construction of sexual identifications was also explored in the research project, using participant observation, media sources and interview data. I took detailed fieldnotes on 'everyday' language use, focusing on the terms used to identify self and others in naturally occurring conversation, as well as in the Russian media and in local 'queer themed' cultural products. The question of language and identity also became part of the interview schedule: women were asked about their identifications, and the meanings they attached to them, while also being invited to talk about various experiences related to their sexuality, such as sexual debut, relationships, 'coming out', ways to negotiate their sexual identity in their everyday settings and patterns of socialising.

Findings, interpretation and further intersections

The final section of the chapter outlines some of the findings of my research project, and suggests ways in which they can be interpreted. Owing to the space constraints, it is not possible to present a detailed discussion of the language of identification used by the women who participated in my study. My more modest aim is to use snippets of my

findings to suggest further lines of enquiry and interpretation, and to show how a research agenda sensitive to cultural and linguistic difference can be productive in foregrounding intersectional complexity.

From the vantage point of someone who did her fieldwork a good ten years later than Essig, it is hard to agree with her contention that Russian 'queers' do not identify on the basis of their sexual practices. In both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, the women I met routinely used categories such as lesbian, heterosexual, straight and bisexual to describe themselves and other people, alongside with more colloquial terms, such as *tema*; this happened both in the somewhat artificial interview context and in naturally occurring conversation. Most women, during interviews, described themselves as either lesbian or bisexual, although these terms of identifications were frequently presented as unsatisfactory and problematic. Aniaⁱⁱ, for example, was reluctant to fully embrace lesbian as a category which can adequately define her:

To be honest, I don't like the word 'lesbian'. [...] I don't consider myself a lesbian, because to me this is the norm. I always felt attracted only to girls, for me this is the norm. I never thought this was anything other than normal; it was just in the order of things. I never thought about this. I am what I am. [...] I don't need a word to describe this. I think [*lesbian*] is just the definition of one's sexual orientation. It is just a way to define yourself in scientific terms, which doesn't say anything at all about you as a person. It is just a definition. Concise and clear. [Ania, Ul'ianovsk, b. 1978].

It is certainly true that some women rejected or resisted certain sexual labels, seen as unable to account for the complexities and ambiguities of individual experience. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that an impatience with rigid categories of identification, perceived as constraining and inadequate, has also been widely documented in research conducted in Western societies (Farqhar 2000; Cameron and Kulick 2006). Dissatisfaction with categories and normative narratives of sexual identity is hardly a peculiarity of the Russian context. In this respect, I depart from Essig (1999), who emphasises 'fuzziness and inclusiveness' as a peculiarity of Russian constructs of sexuality, and predicts that Russian queers would continue to resist binary notions of sexual identity (gay/straight) rooted in Western culture. Some women certainly felt that their sexual/gendered subjectivities and practices did not fit into the polar opposites lesbian or straight. However, they also commonly referred to binary notions of sexual orientation as a term of comparison:

I am a bisexual perhaps, because a lesbian is someone who has never been with a man. To her, this is unnatural, and it would make her sick. But for me it's all the same, if a man is not unpleasant, if he is nice enough, then why not? I can't say I've had lots of relations with men. The only thing is, I can't fall for men [Zinaida, b. 1979, Moscow].

Besides being sexually attracted to women, I also have transsexuality [*transseksual'nost', sic*], it seems, because my female body has always been a burden to me. I've always had the feeling that I should have had a male body. I had this persistent thought. My breast hindered me. I used to think I was the only one on earth like this. Then I started meeting lesbians, and I realised that they are not all like this. Some are not bothered at all [*by their female body*], and this phenomenon, as I found out, is called transsexuality [*sic*]. I feel as if I belong to a third sex, I can't say boldly that I am a man, but at the same time I don't feel a woman either. I don't like it when they call me 'woman'. [Liuba, b. 1962, Moscow].

Both Zinaida and Liuba refer to the category 'lesbian', as well as to 'male' and 'female', as terms of comparison, placing their sexual and gendered selves along the continuum of a binary scale. The concepts of sexual orientation and of the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990) are implied here, and indeed it was common for women to refer to their 'orientation' [*orientatsiia*] when talking about their sexuality. Claims that the 'heterosexual matrix' is inherently alien to Russian culture do not stand up to scrutiny: both my interview data and the vast majority of existing literature indicate that, in the Russian context, sexuality is predominantly talked about, conceptualised and understood in terms of 'having an orientation', of being attracted to people of the same and/or of the opposite sex (Nartova 2004a; Kon 1998). Indeed, as Healey (2001) shows, binary notions of sexual inversion and sexual orientation are not inherently 'Western', as the emergence of medical and legal discourses on homosexuality in 19th and early 20th century Russia followed a path similar to that of other Western European countries. While I share Essig's preoccupation with the need to problematise the normative and ethnocentric lesbian subject, I argue that it is also important to soften and complicate rigid juxtapositions between 'Russian' and 'Western' sexualities. An analysis of empirical categories of identity opens up directions for future research, and the possibility to explore further intersections. One of these intersections is the influence of global sexual culture and of Anglo-American terminology on Russian 'queer' slang, noticeable in the appropriation of terms such as *buch* [butch], *fem*, and *daik* [dyke] (see also Zelenina 2006). It is interesting to note that these words are often domesticated into local use with

slightly different connotations, spellings and phonetics (for a similar point, see Boellstorff 2005). Moreover, they often coexist with Russian-based words: this is the case with *goluboi*, a near-synonym of the widely used *gei* [gay], and of *klava*, another word for fem. An in-depth exploration of the interaction between 'global' and Russian sexual cultures would be valuable in producing a more nuanced account of the relationship between 'East' and 'West', foregrounding hybridisation and appropriation, alongside issues of homogenisation and cultural imperialism.

Findings from my study also highlight important differences in the way women of different ages used categories of sexual identity, a point also suggested by others (Healey 2001; Rotkirch 2002). Only a small numbers of my interviewees were women involved in same-sex relations during the Soviet period, and for this reason I suggest starting points for future research, rather than try to provide firm conclusions. Older women's accounts, however, generally indicated that different narratives of social identity were available to them. For example, talking about their past, they were more likely to identify according to their marital and family status (married/single, mother/childless woman) than according to their romantic relations and sexual practices. Aleksandra associated her former reluctance to identify as a lesbian to her isolation and lack of contact with other queerly identified individuals:

With my partner we've been living together for more than 30 years. We never talked about this, we never talked about being lesbians. We just loved each other and started living together, that's all. At the time our social circle was heterosexual, our friends were heterosexual. And then, little by little, some gay men appeared around us, then others. And our friends, our social network, began to change. In general, most of our closest friends are now gays and lesbians. And all the more now. And only later, by degrees, I got to the understanding that I am a lesbian. [Aleksandra, Moscow, b. 1946].

This quote suggests that identifications reflect women's engagement not only in certain sexual practices, but also in socio-cultural ones: as Plummer (1995) argues, sexual identities are relational, and feed upon communities and shared narratives. Reluctance to identify according to one's sexual practices seems to reflect very different life experiences: several women in their mid-thirties or older traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s the appearance of the first articles openly discussing male and female homosexuality in the mainstream press, and of the first personal ads, which opened up opportunities for socialising in 'lesbian/queer' networks (Stella 2008a). Older women's

past experiences also have to be framed within a different Soviet gender order, where compulsory heterosexuality was explicitly linked to the notion of motherhood as a social duty to the communist state (Ashwin 2000; Healey 2001), and within the very significant shift in discourses on sex and sexuality in late Soviet/post-Soviet Russian society (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002).

Another significant finding to emerge from my analysis is the different use women made of explicit and often emotionally charged terms, such as lesbian, and neutral, unmarked terms such as *tema*. Nastia's explanation illustrates the situational and strategic use of different terms:

In your circle of friends do you use this word [lesbian]?

In jest sometimes we say: "Hey, girls, we are lesbians", or I may say to my girlfriend: "Hey, you're a lesbian and I didn't know it". [*Laughs*]. Yes, we use it, of course, but mainly in jest.

Do you use other words more, like tema?

Yes, because this is a word that you can use in a public place, and people won't turn around.

Do outsiders understand when you say, for example, temnaia girl?

No, very few people know, maybe 20%. Well, this percentage is rising, I mean people are getting to know the expression, but all the same they won't react in the same way as they do to the word 'lesbian'. Because *tema*, let's say... I know people who are into sadomasochism, and to them *tema* means their *tema*. And, let's say, there's people who love hamsters, and they have their own *tema*. I mean, it's like an interest club, name what you will, and you will have a *tema*. [...] the expression *v teme* means to be in the know [*v kurse dela*], to know what's going on in a certain group of people, in a certain community. [Nastia, b. 1981, Moscow].

Because of its ambiguous and euphemistic character, and the overlap with common usage, *tema* was perceived as a neutral and unmarked word, which was safer to use in public. By contrast, several women indicated that lesbian was perceived as an emotionally charged term, imbued with negative connotations. They noted that the word 'sounds harsh' (Ira, b. 1979, Moscow; Aniuta, b. 1978, Moscow), that it is a 'label' (Kristina, b. 1982, Ul'ianovsk), and that 'no one likes the word' (Bella, b. 1982,

Ul'ianovsk)], either phonetically or because of its negative associations. Sonia, who had previously been in heterosexual relations, makes this point more explicitly:

How do you position yourself [in relation to your sexuality]?

At first I could not understand who I am. Now I know who I am. But I don't feel any rejection towards men. They are not repulsive to me, as long as they don't touch me and don't harass me, I just talk to them normally, no problem [spokoino]. And if they try to crack on to me [zatashchit' v postel'] then I distance myself, because I don't need that.

Do you call yourself a lesbian?

Well, yes. It is not a very good word. But if you use this word to refer to one's [sexual] orientation, then yes. This word refers to a lewd girl, who wants all the girls around her. It is not like that. If you look at it that way, it just means slut. But they are everywhere: among heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men. But if you consider it a definition of your [sexual] orientation, then yes [Sonia, b. 1973, Ul'ianovsk].

In contrasting her past heterosexual experiences to her current lesbian relationship, Sonia invokes the ideas of authenticity ('At first I could not understand who I am. Now I know who I am'). She also acknowledges the validity of 'lesbian' as a definition of her sexual orientation; however, she hesitates to identify herself as one, given the negative (and gendered) connotations associated with it ('lesbian' as a man-hater or a predatory, sexually promiscuous woman). A similar point emerges from Zelenina's (2006) online survey among women belonging to a lesbian online community: Zelenina notes that her respondents were often reluctant or unwilling to use 'lesbian' as a term of self-identification, or used it only among a close circle of friendsⁱⁱⁱ. While in other societies too the term lesbian is still used as a terms of abuse (Duncan 1999), in the Russian context this is also likely to reflect the more recent emergence of a 'reverse discourse' (Foucault 1978), challenging the medicalisation and widespread stigmatisation of same-sex practices (Healey 2001). Women's language use also points to the need to problematise idealised notions of a harmonious community, and explore the different layers and social relations that exist within specific social networks. There is a visible discrepancy here between the cultural politics of the lesbian community, keen to reappropriate 'lesbian' as a collective social and political identity (Stella 2008a), and the everyday linguistic strategies adopted by non-heterosexual women who often deliberately draw on

subcultural resources unintelligible to the uninitiated to remain invisible as the sexual 'other'.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued for the importance of giving careful consideration to issues around language, labeling, representation and translation in cross-cultural research on sexuality. I have argued that calls to deconstruct and destabilise normative gay and lesbian subjects can remain an emphatic declaration of intent if not supported by a coherent methodology. Replacing 'gay and lesbian' with 'queer' terminology does not represent a way forward, since queer is not inherently a subversive and 'democratic' category of identity, inclusive of other, non-Western sexualities. An uncritical use of analytical categories may result in the polarisation and reification of 'Eastern' and 'Western' sexualities, while also perpetuating Orientalist notions of the sexual 'other', variously imagined as traditional, underdeveloped, exotic, pre-modern or postmodern.

Strategies of representation can be devised to make visible the discrepancies between the language of the researcher and the language of the researched, for example through the preservation of terms in the original language instead of a translation in the academic text, a practice common in anthropology (Cameron and Kulick 2006; Kulick 2000; Boellstorff 2005) but not as common in other cross-cultural research (Muller 2007). This strategy can contribute to challenging the dominance of Anglo-American perspectives in gay and lesbian/queer studies (Binnie 2004) and the privileged status of English within them, by reminding the reader that languages reflect heterogeneous conceptual world, and that 'a monolingual view of the world is also a monocultural one' (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007:xiv). A research agenda sensitive to linguistic and cultural diversity can hopefully avoid unwarranted polarisations between 'East' and 'West', and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between the global, the national, the transnational and the local. It should be stressed that issues around definition, translation and appropriate terminology raised by cross-cultural research reflect more fundamental questions around positionality, hierarchy and power. Answers to these questions can only be tentative, partial and contingent; however, these issues need to be openly acknowledged and addressed, in order to produce narratives accountable to the communities studied, and to establish relations that create

opportunities for genuine dialogue and exchange across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Research with a linguistic sensibility has the potential to foreground intersectional complexity not only through reflexivity and strategies of representation, but also through an empirical exploration of the language used in the communities studied. The use or rejection of certain categories of sexual identification can be tested empirically in the field, and this can be a strategy to bridge the gap between the language of academic writing and the vernacular used by the communities studied. I have argued against an exclusive focus on self-proclaimed identities, and for the importance of unpacking how identity categories are resisted, appropriated, and re-inscribed with specific meanings by individuals. In the specific case discussed, this exploration has highlighted generational difference, cross-cultural hybridisation and the discrepancy between the contextual and qualified use of the label 'lesbian' by interviewees and attempts to reclaim it as a positive signifier by the more politicised sections of the community.

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ⁱⁱ Not her real name. In the interest of preserving anonymity, all names have been changed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zelenina surveyed 100 women from the online community "Russian-speaking lesbians from the former Soviet Union" on the website livejournal.com. Most respondents were in their 20s, and the overwhelming majority were either from Moscow (63%) or St. Petersburg (18%) (Zelenina 2006).